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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: GON THINKS SAO TOMEAN COUP LEADERS WILL NEGOTIATE

REF: ABUJA 1230

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) MFA Permanent Secretary, Ambassador Daniel Hart and Nigerian Ambassador to Sao Tome and Principe Saidu Pindar discussed the Sao Tomean coup with A/DCM Brian Browne on July 18. Hart and Pindar stated that the proximate cause of the putsch was sustained frustration over de Menezes' foot dragging in paying these soldiers, many of whom were tough and battle-tested after having served in Angola as mercenaries in the employ of the infamous Executive Outcomes outfit. However, due to the discreet encouragement and intrigue of some opposition political figures, their limited agenda quickly expanded to encompass political demands.

2. (C) Hart explained that the coup leaders called themselves the "Buffalo soldiers," the collective nom de guerre earned as mercenaries in Angola. At first, the coup leaders claimed their sole reason for the take-over was to recompense their back pay. Apparently, President de Menezes had stalled and broken promises to these soldiers for quite some time. Because the amount owed was a relatively modest USD 70,000, Nigeria first offered to make the payment. However, by that time, demands had encroached into the political realm. Members of the political opposition had gotten in contact with and transformed the agenda of the coup leaders.

3. (C) Hart stated that many politicians were unhappy with de Menezes and the public was apathetic. The President did not command strong loyalty. De Menezes had failed to implement the proposal of a constitutional review committee because the recommendation called for a significant reapportionment of power from the President to the Prime Minister. This recalcitrance had estranged de Menezes from much of the political class, Pindar asserted. Moreover, many politicians were dissatisfied with the outcome of the 2002 parliamentary elections. These politicians have been angling for new elections, and many saw the coup as an opening to achieve this aim. Pindar added that the political opposition is probably divided. While none of the opposition likes de Menezes, some do not want to broach the subject of new elections because they are already in parliament. Thus, the opposition is divided on the role de Menezes should play. Some favored holding elections for both Parliament and President, some for only Parliament and still others would be satisfied with no election provided Menezes honored the constitutional review committee's recommendation. Hart said rumors of Sao Tomean troops threatening the Nigerian Embassy were false. The coup leaders assured the GON that the soldiers had been posted to protect the Embassy. More importantly, the coupists had signaled their desire for Nigeria to be involved in breaking the impasse. Pindar added that the community of Lusophone nations might also send envoys to Sao Tome.

4. (C) In any event, the coup leaders have shown flexibility. They had heard the widespread condemnation of their action and realized they were surely against the tide of African and international opinion, asserted Pindar. They stated that de Menezes could return home to negotiate with them and without fear for his personal security. However, he would not be immediately returned to office and would not, in their eyes, be negotiating as a sitting Head of State. They are adamant that the status quo ante is untenable. At the very least, de Menezes must implement the constitutional changes for them to acquiesce in his return to power, Pindar stated.

5. (C) Hart emphasized that the GON was exclusively focused on a negotiated solution, but he also stressed the importance of achieving one quickly. The longer it takes, the greater the likelihood that the coup leaders will grow too accustomed to their new positions and the less willing they will be to relinquish power. He said Nigeria was

considering sending a delegation headed by Ambassador
Pindar to Sao Tome and Principe to join Ambassador
Moorefield and their Portuguese counterpart in talking to
the coup leaders.
JETER